



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG

Celebrating 20 Years of Progressive Judaism in Hong Kong

SHABBAT SHALOM

11 – 12 December, 2009

25 Kislev 5770

Parashat Vayeshev
(Genesis 37:1-40:23)

Rabbi Stanton M. Zamek
Cantorial Soloist Shani Ben Or

From the Rabbi's desk

One of the distinctive features of Judaism is the role Jewish history plays in religious life. The vast majority of the observances that punctuate the Jewish calendar are in essence commemorations of key events in our religious history. Our festivals do not, however, merely mark dates on the calendar. Judaism is not an antiquarian pursuit. The genius of Jewish ritual is that it transforms the Jewish past into a living reality. So Hanukkah is not only a remembrance of the stunning victory of the Maccabees in 165 B.C.E., but is also a yearly opportunity to rehearse and recommit ourselves to the enduring truths of that struggle.

The Maccabean revolution was the first fight for religious freedom in the history of the world. Never before had people been willing to take up arms and risk their lives to assert the right to worship as they pleased. In today's world being true to the ideals that inspired the Jews to rise up against the Seleucids means supporting the basic human right of freedom of conscience --- everywhere for everyone. Our history puts us on the side of Swiss Muslims who are told that their mosques may not have minarets and on the side of Chinese Catholics who are forbidden to name their own cardinals. This same history compels us to resist all attempts by Jews to impose their interpretation of our common tradition on other Jews. Today in Eretz Yisrael, Progressive Jews cannot be married by their own Rabbis and those seeking conversion cannot be brought into Jewish life under Progressive auspices. This situation is an ongoing insult to the memory of the Maccabees. So are the comments of Yaakov Neeman, Israel's Justice Minister, who recently said, "Step by step we will bestow religious law upon the citizens of Israel and transform religious law into the binding law of the state." Justice and religious coercion cannot exist at the same time.

Hanukkah is the holiday of Jewish self-respect. The hanukkiyah ablaze in the window is a simple, but profound statement that we are proud to be Jewish and make no apologies for Jewish distinctiveness. When we are at our best, we Jews are engaged non-conformists. We are open to the wider world and unafraid of warm relations between Jews and the adherents of the other great religious traditions of the world. At the same time, we are at home in our Jewish selves and committed to our particular identity and destiny.

As Progressive Jews, this holiday of Jewish pride and self-respect has deep resonances. We assert our place in the contemporary Jewish scene as a matter of right. We kindle the lights of Hanukkah in reverence for the Jewish past, but also in the sure knowledge that we bring the light of a vital, evolving, modern, and authentic Judaism to the world.

In closing, I have to share with you a comment that I heard reporter Jeffrey Goldberg make in a National Public Radio webcast this morning. Goldberg was talking about Hanukkah music and how the best known Hanukkah songs do not fit the festival's "muscular spirit." Issues of musical taste aside, Goldberg precisely captured the essence of Hanukkah. It does indeed have a muscular spirit, which calls us to a muscular approach to Jewish practice. It is not a call to militancy or fundamentalism, but a very clear call to assertiveness in our religious life. Hanukkah is about the courage to be different — as Jews living in a non-Jewish world and as Progressive Jews proudly staking our claim to the Jewish future.

Chag Hanukkah Sameach

All Blessings,
Rabbi Z
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10th December, 2009